Vengeance, Justice, and Sarty Snopes in William Faulkner's "Barn Burning"

William Fennell

Bukkyo University Department of English

Author's note: The following article represents the results of a close-reading of the short-story which was undertaken in order to serve as the basis for further in-depth research of the published critical analysis of the work, with the primary aim of later more carefully formulating and delineating my own original theory regarding the eventual "post-narrative" development of young Sarty Snopes, the boy who is the protagonist of "Barn Burning." In analyzing this story, I have attempted to provide a depiction of the characters, their post-Civil War southern American milieu, and the actions and events as they pertain to the growth and development of Sarty as he will evolve later as an adult man, particularly in light of and in contrast to his menacing and vengeful father. The main text of this article is followed by a list of reference works which have aided me in concluding that my own putative post-narrative interpretive theory answers the question, "What happens to Sarty later in his life?" in a manner that clearly represents a departure from heretofore published interpretations of his actual personal character as the adult Sarty Snopes, the son of the nefarious Abner Snopes.

A central but perhaps not obvious concern in William Faulkner's 1939

short story "Barn Burning" is Sarty's psychological movement away from vengeance and toward justice. On the immediate level of this richly textured story, the boy breaks away from his father and sets out to seek his own life, but an even more profound development involves Sarty's deeply ambiguous, almost visceral reaction to two truths: that his father's life of provocation and revenge is evil, and that Major de Spain's way of life seems to represent an alternative goodness. The ambiguous nature of any lessons that Sarty learns can be attributed both to Faulkner's masterful use of point of view and to Sarty's being only ten years old. For as Faulkner interweaves images and scenes that both implicitly and explicitly contrast vengeance and justice, his narrator blends historical truth, Sarty's immediate thoughts and impressions, and at times even hypothetical or speculative interpretations of Sarty's later thoughts. Thus, I shall examine several of the story's key points to illuminate both what Sarty learns about vengeance and justice and how he learns it.

The story's thematic concern with vengeance and justice is established in the first scene, which takes place in "the store in which the Justice of the Peace's court was sitting" (3). Most interesting about this scene is that Sarty himself is actually on trial, as he is being tested just as he will be throughout the story's action. But as I shall discuss in a moment, Sarty's judge is not the Justice, but his own father. In this first scene, Sarty's thoughts about Mr. Harris, who charges Snopes with burning his barn out of petty vindictiveness, communicate the boy's initial, unquestioning fidelity to his father: Harris is "our enemy . . . ourn! mine and hisn both! He's my father!" (3). When the Justice tells Harris that he needs proof to convict Snopes of burning the barn, Harris somehow knows where to find it: "Get that boy up here. He knows" (4). Evidently, Sarty did in fact witness his father's crime, for he thinks, "He aims for me to lie. . . . And I

will have to do hit" (4). The Justice, upon learning that the boy has been named for the revered Confederate officer Colonel Sartoris, observes that Sarty "can't help but tell the truth" (4). This simple remark is deeply significant in that it does (albeit ironically)foretell Sarty's fate: he will eventually side with the truth, or what seems to him to represent Truth. Yet, at this point, Sarty, in spite of his honorable first name, does not have the will or power to escape the "the old fierce pull of blood" (3). If called upon, Sarty would lie to protect his father from their common enemies, but the Justice and Harris cannot bring themselves to question the boy, and so Sarty is never asked to testify against his father, who is acquitted due to lack of evidence. Thus, the court demonstrates that true justice does not merely seek revenge but instead incorporates virtues such as compassion and mercy, which are not in themselves legal precepts.

A crucial aspect of the theme of vengeance versus justice involves Snopes's judgments and misjudgments of his son. In several instances, including the court scene above, Snopes fails to understand that Sarty does feel the filial pull of blood. Further evidence of the strong bond that Sarty feels with blood comes when he fights a boy who has hissed "barn burner" at the Snopes family (5). Four facts about this fist-fight are critical: first, Sarty engages in the battle instinctively (evidence of the pull of blood); second, he defends the family honor even though he is fully aware of his father's dishonorable actions; third, he sheds blood in the fight; and fourth, Snopes exhibits only callous indifference to Sarty's plight.

One of the pivotal points in the story comes at the end of that same day, when Snopes takes Sarty away from the family's camp. Accusing the boy of disloyalty, Snopes charges, "You were fixing to tell them. You would have told him" (8). After striking Sarty, Snopes verbalizes "without heat

or anger" the lesson he wants to teach his son: "You're getting to be a man. You got to learn. You got to learn to stick to your own blood or you ain't going to have any blood to stick to you" (8). These words recall, ironically, the image of Sarty bloodied in the fist-fight, and his mother asking, "Can't you wipe some of the blood off before it dries?" (7). Further, we should note the way in which Sarty sees his father in the present scene: ". . . a shape black, flat and bloodless as though cut from tin. . . ." (8). Thus, the "bloodless" Snopes fails to comprehend that Sarty has already "stuck to his own blood," and the father apparently has failed to see the physical blood that covers, or sticks to the boy's face. Faulkner thus implies that it is Snopes himself as no conception of what "blood" or family really means, as he himself has no "blood" (as Sarty observes, he is "bloodless")in this sense. Snopes's bloodless nature is forcefully demonstrated in the malicious injustice he thrusts upon his son: the accusation that Sarty is disloyal, the "trial" he puts the boy through, the judgment he comes to without proof, and, of course, the corporal and verbal punishment he coldly hands down. Above all, we come to see Snopes as a cruel tyrant who will not be bound by the laws of others, as well as a hypocrite who imposes his own unjust brand of justice—which amounts to nothing more than revenge—on those who are unfortunate enough to be under his control.

Faulkner underscores the significance and resonance of the violent scene in which Snopes strikes Sarty by allowing his narrator to peer into the boy's future thoughts: "Later, twenty years later, [Sarty] was to tell himself, 'If I had said they wanted only truth, justice, he would have hit me again' " (8). This passage implies that even though Sarty at age ten cannot comprehend in an articulated manner what has happened to him, he somehow senses the truth of the situation, much as he somehow

"smelled" the foods sealed in tin in the story's first scene (3).

The story's major turning point comes on the morning after Snopes strikes Sarty. The family arrives at their new home, a "paintless two-room house identical the dozen others" they have inhabited, and about which one of Sarty's sisters says, "Likely hit ain't fitten for hawgs" (9). Snopes, taking Sarty with him, says he intends to "have a word with the man that aims to begin tomorrow owning me body and soul for the next eight months" (9). In bringing Sarty along to Major de Spain's house, Snopes undoubtedly plans to build on the lesson of blood ties that he began the night before. But Sarty's view of the world, including his perception of his father, changes irrevocably the moment he comes under "the spell of the house" upon seeing de Spain's home: "[A]t that instant he forgot his father and the terror and despair both, and even when he remembered his father again . . . the terror and despair did not return" (10). This point in the story marks the boy's primary psychological shift, as he moves from containment with his father's narrow world of vengeance and injustice toward the wider sphere of truth and justice, as Sarty senses it, of Major de Spain and the larger community. We are told that because the family "had sojourned until now in a poor country, a land of small farms and fields and houses, [Sarty] had never seen a house like this before" (10). The language of this passage, particularly the word "sojourned," suggests that Sarty has found a kind of Promised Land. Or, perhaps to the innocent boy's eyes the de Spain mansion resembles "paradise," and so he has found his way back to the Garden of Eden. If so, the story's treatment of the theme of justice would suggest that Snopes, the prideful pyromaniac, appears like Satan bent on destroying this pure and peaceful place. More immediately, though, Sarty's description of Major de Spain's home reflects the boy's instinctive association of the place

with truth, goodness, and above all, justice:

> Hit's big as courthouse he thought quietly, with a surge of peace and joy whose reason he could not have thought into words, being too young for that: They are safe from him. People whose lives are part of this peace and dignity are beyond his touch, he no more to them than a buzzing wasp: capable of stinging for a little moment but that's all; the spell of this peace and dignity rendering even the barns and stable and cribs which belong to it impervious to the puny flames he might contrive . . . . (10)

Once again, the narrator provides in the form of mental dialogue a rather sophisticated interpretation of the thoughts the boy would have if he were able to translate his feelings, his sensations, into words. Sarty and his father's antipodal views of the house are likewise communicated to us through the narrator's interpretation of what the boy "could not have thought . . . into words": Sarty "could even want [the house] but without envy, without sorrow, certainly never with that ravening and jealous rage which unknown to him walked in the ironlike black coat before him" (11). A testament to the power that the "spell of the house" has over Sarty is his naïve and futile hope that his father will fall under the same spell: "Maybe he will feel it too. Maybe it will even change him from what maybe he couldn't help but be" (11). Sarty's sentiments reveal both compassion and optimism with respect to his father, but of course, the harsh reality of subsequent events will soon crush Sarty's idealistic hopes.

Although Sarty (in contrast with the narrator) cannot articulate or fully comprehend the tumultuous events that swirl around him, he is adept at understanding actions, whether they are his father's or his own. Similarly,

visual images, such as the splendor of de Spain house, communicate to him in ways that either obviate or transcend words (which in part explains why Faulkner employs an adult narrator, apparently at a distance of some twenty years, to interpret all this for the reader). Actions and images, then, mean *something* to Sarty, even if he cannot express in words precisely *what* they mean. This kind of pre-verbal comprehension is central to Sarty's interpretation of what takes place at the de Spain house. Sarty does articulately describe what he sees when his father is at the front door: "the flat, wide, black hat, the formal coat of broadcloth which had once been black but which now had that friction-glazed greenish cast of the bodies of old house flies, the lifted sleeve which was too large, the lifted hand like a curled claw" (11). Having deliberately planted his stiff foot in the horse dung, Snopes becomes in the mind of his son a grotesque monster bent on violating the house, a symbol of peace and purity. The implicit identification of Snopes with Beelezub, "Lord of the Flies," along with the association with filth and dung, underscores the depth of Sarty's abhorrence as he witnesses his father's acts of defilement and dishonor.

That Snopes has not come to the house to "have a word" with Major de Spain becomes clear when, even though the servant at the door tells him that "Major ain't home nohow," the implacable Snopes flings the door back and enters (11). When the lady of the house asks him to "please go away," Snopes appears "to examine the house with brief deliberation" (12). And then Sarty witnesses his father's crude display of defiance: "[T]he boy watched him pivot on the good leg and saw the stiff foot drag round the arc of the turning, leaving a final long and fading smear" of horse dung (12). This is what Snopes has come for, to have his boy see the house defiled as part of the lesson of blood ties. After using the top step to scrape the remaining dung from his boot, Snopes verbalizes the lesson he wishes

Sarty to learn about the house: "'Pretty and white, ain't it?' he said. 'That's sweat. Nigger sweat. Maybe it ain't white enough yet to suit him. Maybe he wants to mix some white sweat with it'" (12). But compared with what Sarty has just seen—his sanctuary of peace and joy deliberately sullied by the monster-like Snopes—the father's words, even though they contain some undeniable and ugly truth, mean absolutely nothing to the boy. Later, when Snopes intentionally damages the sullied rug with the "flattish fragment of field stone" (14), the incident only serves as further visible evidence to Sarty of Snopes's vindictive, brutish, and primitive destructiveness.

The final scenes of "Barn Burning" present the culmination of the inner conflict for Sarty between the forces of vengeance and justice. Sarty, of course, has been caught between the two: even though he is nearly mesmerized by the "spell" of de Spain's house, he cannot easily repudiate the pull of "the old habit, the old blood which he had not been permitted to choose for himself" (21). At one point, in fact, Sarty considers escaping his dilemma by simply running away. Preparing to burn de Spain's barn, Snopes orders Sarty to fetch some fuel, and the boy thinks: "I could run on and on and never look back, never need to see his face again. Only I can't. I can't" (21). Sarty cannot merely run away because he has witnessed and experienced his father's vengeance, including the violation of his sanctuary, and he now knows he must side with justice, or at least what he instinctively senses to be right. When Sarty breaks away from his mother's grasp and sets out to warn de Spain, he feels "free" (22). Yet, the freedom that Sarty finds outside the pull of blood is not a child's escape into a carefree existence, which Sarty naively envisioned in the peace and joy of de Spain's house. Instead, Sarty now enters the adult world, where, he discovers, even freedom and justice come at great cost.

Faulkner's skillful rendering of the final scene creates more of the rich ambiguity that makes "Barn Burning" as a whole so satisfying. Particularly effective is Sarty's ironic echoing of the phrase "my father" (24), which he used in the first court scene to express his joining with Snopes against their common enemies. Now, of course, Sarty is faced with an inescapable paradox: Snopes, even dead, remains Sarty's father; yet by turning him in, Sarty has served as the man's most potent enemy. Similar ambiguity and irony envelop the closing paragraph, the imagery of which points to a hopeful future for Sarty but simultaneously suggests that his life will not be easy or uncomplicated: "He got up. He was a little stiff, but walking would cure that. . . . He went on down the hill, toward the dark woods within which the liquid silver voices of the birds called unceasing" (25). The stiffness, we must presume, comes not as much from the cold ground as from that "bloodless" Snopes blood which will always run through Sarty's veins. And even though walking seems to promise a cure for Sarty, he nonetheless paces toward "the rapid and urgent beating of the urgent and quiring heart of the late spring night" (25). The word "quiring" itself resonates with paradox, as it suggests associations with both an inquiry and a choir. The story's closing line ironically echoes Sarty's earlier thoughts about running away. Earlier, he wished that he "could run on and on and never look back" (21). Now at the end of the narrative, Sarty does not run but walks down the hill. Having broken from the bonds of injustice of his father's vengeance and moved under his own power toward a sense of justice, "he [does] not look back" (25).

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